DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 225 410 FL 013 460

AUTHOR Gilbert, Judy
TITLE Pronunciation: An Aid to Listening Comprehension.
INSTITUTION California Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.
PUB DATE 82
NOTE 11p.; In its: "CATESOL Occasional Papers," Number 8, p.62-71, Fall 1982; Paper presented at the CATESOL State Conference (Sacramento, CA, 1982); For related documents, see FL 013 455-463.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Drills (Practice); *English (Second Language); *Intonation; *Listening Comprehension; Pronunciation; *Pronunciation Instruction; Second Language Instruction; Stress (Phonology)

ABSTRACT

Second language pronunciation and listening comprehension are inherently linked. Furthermore, they are bound by a system in which the individual sounds are related. The focus of second language instruction should be the framework of intonation within which the sounds are organized. Instruction should be based on the way English speakers depend on intonation to organize thoughts and highlight important words. Students should be taught how to determine which words to emphasize and how to recognize and produce the three most useful signals of stress: pitch change, vowel lengthening, and clarity of stressed sounds. They should learn that native speakers deliberately deviate from a basic emphasis pattern in order to call attention to a new focus of thought. Minimal word pairs can be used for teaching both pronunciation and meaning by presenting them in sentences that require meaningful responses. (RW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

CATESOL

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

California Association
Teachers of English to
Speakers of Other Languages

CATESOL Occasional Papers
Number 8 (Fall, 1982)

ED225410

PRONUNCIATION: AN AID TO LISTENING COMPREHENSION

Judy Gilbert
American Language Program
California State University, Hayward

Both pronunciation and listening skills can be taught more effectively if instruction is based not on individual sounds, but on the way English speakers depend on intonation to organize thoughts and highlight the important words. Students should be taught how to:

-- *determine which words to emphasize. The native speaker deliberately deviates from a basic emphasis pattern in order to highlight new thoughts (concepts not yet mentioned) in contrast to old thoughts (ideas already mentioned or understood). This has a fundamental effect on meaning.*

-- *recognize and produce the three most useful signals of stress: pitch change, vowel lengthening, and clarity of stressed sounds.*

Here is a sad story: the teacher has just completed a successful pronunciation lesson using minimal pairs of words to teach the sounds /r/ and /l/. All of the students were able to manage the distinction by the end of the lesson. The students feel good and the teacher feels good. Then, as the students are leaving the room, one turns to the teacher and says cheerily,

---

This paper is based on a talk given at the 1982 CATESOL State Conference in Sacramento.

Judy Gilbert, an instructor in the American Language Program at California State University, Hayward, has presented talks at CATESOL, TESOL and NAFSA meetings, and is the author of a textbook for pronunciation and listening comprehension, Clear Speech, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

The author would like to thank Virginia French Allen and Dwight Bolinger for their comments on this paper.

FL013460

"So rong!" The teacher doesn't feel so good anymore.

The fact is, minimal pair practice sometimes seems to yield minimal results. This may be part of the reason the teaching of pronunciation has fallen into disfavor in so many programs. Lack of success is discouraging to teachers, and students sometimes feel that pronunciation is an endless succession of unrelated and unmanageable pieces. If the work is so discouraging, shouldn't we just drop it? Why would we include pronunciation in the curriculum?

There are two main reasons to teach pronunciation: 1) students who cannot be understood are cut off from conversation with native-speakers, and 2) students who cannot hear English well are also cut off from the language, except in printed form. Pronunciation is important because students need to understand and be understood. This paper is based on the belief that we not only must teach pronunciation, but that we can -- provided that we have a genuinely discourse-based framework within which to teach. Pronunciation and listening comprehension are inherently linked together. Furthermore, they are linked by a unified system within which the individual sounds are systematically related. Students need this sense of system, in order to make sense of the separate pieces.

Instead of concentrating just on teaching sounds, we should be teaching the framework of intonation, within which the sounds are organized.

PROPOSITION ONE: The most significant part of pronunciation is intonation, including rhythm and pitch patterns. (Nash 1971)

In 1974, Francis Coppola produced a movie *The Conversation*, which illustrates this proposition. The movie is about a San Francisco detective who has been hired by a rich man to spy on his young wife. The young woman has been meeting secretly with his young male assistant, and the husband wants to know what they are talking about. So the detective, using highly sensitive microphones, records their conversation as they walk around Union Square at noon. Because there is so much noise in the busy square at lunch time, the only thing clear in the conversation is their intention to meet again at 3 o'clock on the succeeding Sunday, at the Jack Tar Hotel. The detective spends all Saturday electronically filtering the tape, in order to hear more of the conversation. All the while he is working, he broods about his moral responsibility if his work should bring harm to the young woman from her jealous husband. In this guilty state of mind, he finally is able to filter one sentence clearly, and he hears the young wife say "He'll KILL us, if he gets the chance!" The detective falls into a panic, as his worst fears are realized. He must hide the tape. But it is stolen. Now, sure that the husband has heard

the fatal words, he determines to go to the hotel on Sunday and stop the disaster. But when he arrives at the Jack Tar, he is already too late. The ambulance is already there, with the police and a crowd around the door. A stretcher is being carried out, carrying a dead body. But it is not the body of the wife; it is the body of the husband. Walking behind, with a tiny smile on her face, is the young wife.

What happened? The smile on the wife's face makes the detective realize that he had completely misunderstood the conversation on tape. Because he had been so sure that the young woman was in danger, he thought he had heard her say "He'll KILL us if he gets the chance!" But what she had actually said was "HE'LL kill US if he gets the chance!" The same words, but an entirely different meaning. If the detective had not been in such a biased frame of mind, he would have picked up on the difference. That is exactly what our students need help learning: to pick up on the signals of intonation.

Intonation is not a frill, to be added later if you have time. It is the very essence of pronunciation, the framework within which the individual sounds are shaped into a flow. (Abberton, 1978)

PROPOSITION TWO: Intonation has two major functions: 1) to delimit thought-groups (phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs) and 2) to highlight the focus of thought. (Danes, 1960)

The same musical processes of pitch and rhythm changes are used in other languages, but for different purposes and in different ways. (Ohala and Gilbert, 1980) Therefore it is necessary for our students to use these familiar tools for new purposes, the purposes of English. To begin with, students need to learn that in English, important words are highlighted, or emphasized, by intonation. Then they need to learn which words are considered important.

There is a basic pattern of sentence highlighting which is used automatically by native speakers of English. They deviate from this pattern in order to emphasize something special. The deviation is a deliberate attention-getting signal. A second language student who deviates accidentally will confuse the native listener. Since most learners are unaware of the basic emphasis pattern, they deviate by accident quite frequently. Sometimes the mistake is due to interference from their mother tongue emphasis patterns, and sometimes the wrong emphasis comes simply from the effort they are expending to get the word in at all. Whatever the cause, this mis-emphasis can cause confusion. For instance, when the learner says "HE went to the store," it sounds to a native speaker like an intentional contrast of he with some other person, which is what this emphasis pattern would

mean for a native speaker of English. This is part of the reason that many of our students have a tendency to sound argumentative, even though that is not their intention. As E. M. Forster said, "A pause in the wrong place, an intonation misunderstood, and a whole conversation went awry." (A Passage to India)

Not only does ignorance of the basic pattern of emphasis cause an added element of confusion in the learner's speech, but it also means that the learner is missing important signals while listening to spoken English. Therefore, both for purposes of understanding and being understood, it is productive for the student to become aware of how English intonation works.

The basic emphasis pattern of English is based on the rough division of all words into the categories of Content Words and Structure Words. The content words (nouns, main verbs, adjectives and adverbs) carry real information: what children might call picture words, because they call up images to the mind's eye. On the other hand, structure words (prepositions, pronouns, auxiliaries, articles, to be, conjunctions and others) carry little or no concrete information, except in a structural sense. No picture is likely to come to the mind's eye when the ear hears if or a or is.

The basic pattern of emphasis in English is to highlight content words (the information carriers) and to downplay structure words. For example, "She LIVES in a VILLAGE." The main verb lives and the noun village are highlighted by intonation. The pronoun, preposition and article are downplayed. Similarly, in the sentence, "He'll KILL us!", the main verb is highlighted and the pronouns and auxiliary are downplayed. Typically, the final content word of a sentence is the most emphasized, since it is usually the focus of thought, carrying the most information.

PROPOSITION THREE: The native speaker of English deviates from the basic emphasis pattern, in order to call attention to a new focus of thought.

Notice the changes of focus in the following exchange: "Where'll we EAT?" "Let's eat in a RESTAURANT." "WHICH restaurant?" (Allen, 1971, 77) In the first utterance, the focus of thought is on the final content word, eat. In the response, however, eat is now already understood between the two people, so there is no need to empnasize it. The new thought, which is now the focus of the new remark, is restaurant. Similarly, in the next response, restaurant is an old thought; the new focus is which. This the systematic process by which native speakers call attention to what they consider the shifting focus of meaning. That is why the intonation of the sentence "HE'LL kill US!" should have alerted the detective in *The Conversation* to the true nature of the conversation, which was not a discussion of lovers' fears, but a murder plot. Since the verb, kill, was downplayed, in a deviation from the basic pattern, the word must

have already been an old thought. The new thought relates to the pronouns.

Students must learn not only to highlight the important words, but to systematically downplay the words which should not be highlighted. A frequent problem, depending partly on the patterns of the mother tongue, is that students simply highlight too many words. This not only has a tendency to make them sound excited, but it obscures the emphasis contrast on which the English listener relies for recognizing the focus. (Alien, 1971, 81)

A language student who is deaf to this sytem of signals will not only miss a significant part of the meaning, but will fail to follow the system when speaking. An added advantage of teaching this system of emphasizing focus words is that there is a logical interrelationship with reading. Students typically read each word with equal attention. This is not only time-consuming, but misses the organization of thought. The good reader pays most attention to the words which carry the most new information: the focus of meaning. These are the same words which are emphasized in spoken English.

Since the student's own language may not follow this particular highlighting principle in speech, there is a need for explicit instruction in the system. It is helpful to point out that all the phenomena of reductions and contractions fit into this pattern of emphasis, since the purpose is to downplay the less important words, in order to more fully highlight the important ones. Since some students are suspicious of contractions, thinking them sub-standard, this principle of intonational emphasis can help convince them that contractions are appropriate and, indeed, characteristic of the spoken language. They do not need to use them, but they do need to recognize them.

How, specifically, are the words highlighted? Students can benefit from study of the mechanical ways emphasis is given in the sentence. The basic principle is that highlighting is achieved by emphasizing the stressed syllable in the important words. First the student must understand that each English word has a stress pattern which is an integral part of the pronunciation of the word. This pattern must be learned when the word is learned. Many students assume that the stress pattern is some sort of frill, or else they do not notice it at all. A teacher from Colombia reported that one of her students came back from a stay at a university in the U. S. and told her angrily, "I always told them that my major was eco nomics, but they always pretended not to understand." There is some sound evidence for the claim that English speakers tend to store vocabulary according to stress patterns. (Brown, 1977, 48) If the wrong syllable is stressed, the listener is confused by not finding a suitable word stored according to that pattern. Critical time may be lost during the search, so that the listener forgets the sounds that started the

search. Whether or not this is a correct analysis of what happens when a word is stressed wrongly, we have all noticed how hard it is to recognize a word with the wrong stress pattern. Therefore, the students must first of all be convinced of the necessity of learning the stress patterns of new words.

PROPOSITION FOUR: There are three most useful signals for stress: 1) pitch change, 2) length, and 3) clarity.

It has long been the practice to teach stress as if it were synonomous with loudness, but this approach may not be as useful as has been assumed. Loudness is used to indicate stress in most languages. What is new to our students, and therefore what is more productive to teach, are the signals which are not used in their languages, or which are used in different combinations or for different functions.

Pitch change is possibly the most powerful signal of English stress. In the word banana, the second syllable is stressed, so the voice pitch goes up to call attention to the syllable. It is also possible to have a drop in pitch serve the same function, as in the question "Banana?", in which the pitch might drop at that point instead of rising. The basic signal is that the pitch must change, and usually the direction is up. Since it is not easy for most people to notice a pitch change, or recognize the direction of the change, it is helpful to give this pattern in a form stripped of the distractions of foreign sounds and meaning. This can be done in several ways. The most direct approach is to model the word or sentence with a toy kazoo. (Gilbert, 1980) The kazoo is basically a resonance chamber, amplifying the sound of the hum in the teacher's throat. It can present the pitch pattern without words, to help students focus on the intonation. Other useful techniques include drawing pitch lines, although this involves more mental effort, since it is a transformation from auditory to visual modes. Interesting experiments are being undertaken using visual feedback of the student's intonation, processed with a computer and recreated as a pitch line on a video screen. This is not a practical approach for most teachers, but may someday be feasible. (de Bot and Mailfert, 1982)

Another way to train students' awareness of pitch patterns is to compare a word like chocolate, which is roughly the same in several languages. The pitch pattern line will differ strikingly from one language to the next in English, Spanish and Japanese, as well as some other languages. Another exercise, which has useful psychological ramifications, is to compare the pitch patterns for the student's own name, in English and the mother tongue. This comparison can begin to help the student understand that Americans' mispronunciation is a systematic effect of language rules, rather than any personal disrespect. Also, although students probably never thought about the pitch pattern of their names, there is absolutely no question in their minds when the

pattern is wrong. It is valuable for them to begin to listen to American's mispronunciation of words from the students' languages, such as cities in their countries, as a laboratory demonstration of English rules. Much can be learned from this approach to mispronunciation not as insult, or source of comedy, but as practical indication of what the student needs to learn.

The second major signal of stress is vowel length. It is possibly the most reliable sign of a stressed syllable. (Ladefoged, 1975, 79) Again, think of the word banana. In most of our students' languages, each vowel has about the same length. In a language like Japanese, a lengthened vowel mean double vowel, and it can change the meaning of the word as much as our distinction between /r/ and /l/. In another language, Czech, a long vowel is marked by a symbol above the written letter, and has a distinctive meaning. In neither Czech nor Japanese does this extra length have any necessary relationship with stress. Extra length to mark stress is, in fact, unnatural for most of our students, so they need extra help in practicing the phenomenon. One technique which helps focus the mind on drawing out the vowel is a heavy rubber band. The physical effort required to pull out the band, while saying the word, provides a kinaesthetic aid to the mental effort. (Gilbert, 1978) This technique, as well as the use of the kazoo to concentrate students' minds on pitch patterns, is based on the principle of right and left brain specialization. (Bogen, 1975) The general principle here is that the more ways you can present a new concept, the better chance there is to succeed in teaching it.

The third major signal of stress is clarity. Contrary to the situation in most languages, where vowels are always kept full and clear, the contrast between clear and obscure vowels is characteristic of English. (Bolinger, 1981) Most of our students have been trained in their own languages to maintain the clarity of each vowel. This seriously interferes with comprehension of spoken English. It is one of the main reasons why the English teacher should not present a model in which all vowels and consonants are carefully articulated in their full forms. This only reinforces the students' natural tendency to rely on a stream of clear sounds, which is a kind of English only spoken in the English class. (Brown, 1977) English rhythm is produced by the differing lengths of full and reduced vowels. The relationship of this rhythm to stress is that only full vowels can be stressed. The so-called schwa vowel, which is a reduced vowel, is not only very short, but rather obscure in sound. It can never be stressed. The practical significance of the fact that the stressed vowel must be clear is that this is the place for the learner to concentrate on clarity. It should come as welcome news to the learners that they do not need to pronounce all the sounds in a sentence clearly. Of course, it is good if the non-stressed full vowels are also clear, but in a difficult communication situation, effort should be concentrated only on the points of emphasis: the stressed syllables in the emphasized words. This means that the work

of correcting a misunderstood sentence is much simpler; the misunderstood speaker does not need to correct every sound, but only those few sounds in the crucial syllables. Consonants as well as vowels must be clear at these points.

At this point of pronunciation training, after the students have the framework of sentence emphasis clearly in mind, and therefore understand just where clarity of sounds is needed, it is suitable to use all of the sound clarification techniques which have been standard in the past. Minimal pair drills do present useful information about the contrast between languages, and they make good practice if not carried on too long, since they help the student concentrate on the difference. Minimal sentence-pair drills are even better, since they put the contrast in a meaningful context. (Bowen, 1972) Among the possible ways to practice these minimal sentence pairs are the following: Write on the board, "There's something in my eyes! Call a doctor!" Underneath this statement and response, write, "There's something in my ice! Call a waiter!" Now say either the statement about the eyes or the ice, asking students to respond to whichever statement they think they heard. That is, if they hear eyes, they should say "Call a doctor!"

Another approach is to have students pass objects according to request, such as "Pass the paper, please," in contrast to "Pass the pepper, please." Mis-hearing, or mis-pronunciation, will produce a truly mistaken response, and this is much closer to real life language use than the minimal word pair drills.

Vowels are not the only sounds marked by clarity in the stressed syllable. Consonants also must be sharply distinct. Notice the difference in the /t/ sound in the words atom and atomic. While speakers may vary in the clarity of the /t/ sound in atom, some reducing it to something like a /d/ sound, the /t/ in atomic must be absolutely clear because it begins a stressed syllable. This is one of the main purposes for aspiration (the puff of air) after a stop sound like /p/, /t/, and /k/; the aspiration clearly differentiates the sounds from their voiced partners, /b/, /d/, and /g/. English uses every distinctive feature it can in order to make the sounds in the stressed syllables clear.

A standard, and very useful practice, is to draw a profile of the face, showing the parts of the mouth involved in making sounds. Unfortunately, students sometimes have trouble relating this drawing to their own teeth, tongue, etc. One way to help students orient themselves in the visualization is to draw the profile while they are watching, rather than simply presenting the completed image. As you draw the upper lip, ask them to touch it with the tips of their tongues. Then you have them follow the chalk line around the lip, over the front teeth, etc., as you draw the line. No matter how poor an artist you may be,

or how unrealistic the proportions, the students are having a direct kinaesthetic relationship to what you are demonstrating. This technique prepares them for later directions, such as comments about "placing the tip of the tongue on the tooth ridge." It serves to make them realize that the sharp V-shape behind the lip really is representing their front teeth. This is otherwise not easily accepted since it does not fit the image most of us have of front teeth which, after all, are never seen from the side. Incidentally, the V-shape can be used as a handy mnemonic device for practicing the /v/ sound, which is so difficult for many of our students. The critical feature of a /v/ is that the upper teeth must remain in contact with the lower lip. When our students see the "v" letter in print, tell them to remember the "v" is a picture of the V-shape of the upper front teeth. Since many students have been reading English in print for some time, and therefore presumably habitually reacting to the "v" letter with a wrong mental image of the articulation appropriate to the letter, this "fang" image may help dislodge the wrong pattern.

There are many techniques, old and new, for teaching sounds. This is productive work as long as the practice of sound clarity is kept in perspective, with the larger framework of intonational signals of the focus of meaning.

Our teaching goal in pronunciation should be to encourage the ability to make and hear sentence emphasis. If a sentence was misunderstood, the speaker should go back and check these 3 points:

1. Were the right words emphasized?
2. Were the stress patterns of those words correct?
3. Were the sounds in the stressed syllables of those words clear?

Students need to understand spoken English quickly, and be understood easily when they speak. Pronunciation, if taught from the standpoint of basic signals of meaning, should be an integral part of training in listening comprehension.

REFERENCES

Abberton, Evelyn. (1978) Speech improvements in deaf adults using laryngographic displays. Speech and Hearing Work in Progress, University College of London, Department of Phonetics and Linguistics: 33-60.

Allen, Virginia F. (1971) Teaching intonation, from theory to practice. TESOL Quarterly 4. March: 73-81.

Bogen, Joseph E. (1975) Some educational aspects of hemispheric specialization. UCLA Educator. 17:24-32.

Bolinger, Dwight L. (1981) Two Kings of Vowels, Two Kinds of Rhythm. University of Indiana Linguistics Club.

de Bot, Kees and Kate Mailfert. (1982) The teaching of intonation: fundamental research and classroom applications. TESOL Quarterly v. 16. No. 1:71-77.

Bowen, F. Donald. (1972) Contextualizing pronunciation practice in the ESL classroom. TESOL Quarterly 6. March: 83-94.

Brown, Gillian. (1977) Listening to Spoken English. Longman Group Ltd. London.

Danes, Frantisek. (1960) Sentence intonation from a functional point of view. Word 16:34-54.

Gilbert, Judy B. (1978) Gadgets: nonverbal tools for teaching pronunciation. CATESOL Occasional Papers :68-78.

_____. (1980) Prosodic development: some pilot studies. Research in Second Language Acquisition, Krashen, S., and Scarcella, R. (Eds.) Newbury House: 110-117. Rowley, Massachusetts.

_____. (1983) Clear Speech. Cambridge University Press.

Ladefoged, Peter. (1975) A Course in Phonetics. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. New York.

Nash, Rose. (1971) Phonemic and prosodic interference and their effects on intelligibility. International Congress of Phonetic Sciences 7:138-139.